André Malraux: a medical interpretation¹

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André Malraux (1901–1976) was a commanding figure in French literary, social and political life for half a century. His influence continues to be felt beyond the francophone world in the appreciation of the arts, the stature of his major literary works, the phrases he introduced into language and, above all, in the image he personified. Malraux's greatest work without doubt was his own life, which he quite self-consciously shaped and the story of which he equally consciously distorted in order to create a legend which expressed his ideals (de Courcel 1976, Sulzberger 1976).

Malraux was fascinated by medicine. Although himself untrained, he developed a characteristically obsessive interest in medical phenomena which he used to good advantage in key passages from his work. His own physician, Dr Louis Bertagna, a neurologist of eminence, became a close personal friend and literary companion (Bertagna 1977, Malraux 1974). The relationship between the two had elements of a mirror-image: the one a writer and art critic interested in medicine as an intellectual framework and source of metaphor, the other a physician interested in literary criticism and history and a skilled essayist. The role of medicine in Malraux's works has not been fully explored, nor has the influence of his own lifelong illness on his work been examined.

André Malraux: life as myth (Lacouture 1975, Greshoff 1975, Langlois 1976)

Malraux's life was full of contradictions and digressions. Although the facts of his life are extraordinary enough, he methodically altered and distorted the facts by exaggeration, embellishment and selective disclosure. The myth he created in so doing ultimately came as a great sacrifice, however, because it obscured a truth that was perhaps more impressive than the myth.

Malraux was obsessively secret about his personal life, although he was given to somewhat misleading explanations of the events behind the public record. The definitive biography of Malraux, by Jean Lacouture (1975), is a masterpiece of historical reconstruction and psychological interpretation. Most striking about Malraux's life are the contradictions: a literary giant who lacked a university education, the art critic and aesthete who attempted to smuggle archaeologically significant sculpture out of Cambodia, the dandy and fashionplate who led troops into battle, and the communist sympathizer and revolutionary who embraced De Gaulle and served in his government. Malraux was no easy man to understand.

Briefly, Malraux was born on 3 November 1901 to lower middle-class parents of Flemish and Italian origin and was raised in a grimy suburb of Paris by his mother after his parents divorced. His early education was in schools of mediocre reputation, but as a teenager he became a skilled buyer of rare books for a bookseller and soon began to write literary reviews and essays. Within a remarkably brief period he entered the rarified world of French letters and became a figure in Parisian literary circles even before writing his first full-length work, a surrealist fantasy which embarrassed him in his maturity. In 1921 he married Clara Goldschmidt, a highly intelligent and articulate woman of German Jewish heritage living in the aftermath of the Dreyfus trial; they divorced some years later. In the early 1920s, while he

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was still often regarded as a supercilious and arrogant dilettante, Malraux embarked on the first of what were to be a series of legendary adventures, the embodiment of both idealism and opportunism in a succession of exotic locales. Later, his adventures were to take place in familiar locales transformed by the surrealism of history.

In 1923 Malraux and his wife went to French Indochina, nominally on an archaeological expedition, and attempted to steal a classic frieze of Khmer sculpture from an abandoned temple in Cambodia. They were caught, tried, and ultimately acquitted on a technicality, but not before they succeeded in making the trial a cause célèbre by turning it into an exposé of the arbitrariness of the colonial regime. Rather than retreat discreetly after their acquittal, however, they had the temerity to help found a muck-raking newspaper in Saigon and in short order established themselves as advocates for the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Cochin Chinese, and as political agitators. This enterprise ended with the suppression of the newspaper and a brief period of travel in China that became wildly exaggerated. (On his return to France, Malraux claimed to have served as a propaganda and political commissar for the Kuomintang during the Chinese revolution of 1925.) This period in Malraux's life provided the experiences and ideas on which he based his Asian novels: 'The Royal Way' (1930), a novel of Cambodia which proved to be a source in a recent incident of journalistic plagiarism (Time 1983); 'The Conquerors' (1928), a novel of revolution and personal commitment in Canton; and 'Man's Fate' (1933), probably Malraux's greatest novel and the work which introduced the phrase 'the human condition'.

During the 1930s Malraux became increasingly involved in politics. Although he never joined the communist party, he represented the party on many occasions at international meetings and was publicly sympathetic to communism. During the Spanish Civil War, this already comfortable and distinguished writer in his thirties suspended his literary life and joined the Loyalists, commanding the international airforce squadron 'España' in the unsuccessful battle against the armies of Franco and the Falange. This experience formed the basis for his other best-known work, 'Man's Hope' (1938).

During the Nazi invasion and occupation of France, Malraux was in turn a prisoner of war, a leading figure in the Resistance, and commander of an irregular infantry brigade which defended Strasbourg. For whatever inexplicable reason, his works which draw from this experience, such as 'The Walnut Trees of Altenburg' (1948), were set much earlier in World War I.

After such a baroque and conspicuously flamboyant life of action, Malraux abruptly shifted both his political affiliations and artistic emphasis. He attached himself politically to General Charles De Gaulle, a move that many feel cost him the sympathy of the Nobel Prize selection committee, and became Minister of Cultural Affairs in the Fifth Republic. During this period he wrote extensively on aesthetics and the cultural significance of art, such as the highly influential work 'Museum Without Walls' (1967). He may be remembered by American tourists in the 1960s as the official responsible for having the accumulated dirt cleaned off the monuments of Paris.

Malraux was a chain-smoker (McMullen 1976, *Time* 1974) and succumbed to lung cancer in 1976 (Braden 1977); he is reported to have died of an intercurrent pulmonary embolus (Gauthier & Michalczyk 1977). He never allowed the nature of his lifelong neurological condition, which will be discussed below, to be disclosed. In character until the end, however, he insisted on tantalizing his readers with legend and the skilful weaving of autobiography and fiction. His two explicitly autobiographical works are remarkably uninformative 'Antimemoirs' (1968) is an 'anti-autobiography', a description of the individuals of history and the cultural currents of his time and acquaintance which reveals very little new about the man's own life. His last book to be published, and the only one to allude to his own illness, 'Lazarus' (1977), is a complexly mordant interweaving of rewritten scenes from a previous novel describing a lethal gas attack on the Eastern front in 1916, with recollections from his 1973 hospitalization at the Hôpital Salpêtrière for a neurological disorder.

Throughout his life he was like an actor on stage backlit behind a scrim, tantalizing the public with his shadow but concealing his real self.

Medical aspects of Malraux's work

A book by Malraux is not easy to follow. His characters are players in a much larger drama and the plots are specific episodes in historical events. Typically, a Malraux novel begins with a dramatic political event and progresses with discrete crisp action scenes separated by lengthy erudite dialogues. Although Malraux certainly had an ear for language, his characters speak identically without regard for status or education because the dialogue is actually in Malraux's own head with the characters serving as mouthpieces. Malraux does not distract the reader from the argument by giving his characters too strong a personal identity. On the other hand, his characters are not bland and they are made to suffer excruciating loss and punishment in the course of their commitment to a movement that will change history but which usually fails to attain its noble objective.

Although Malraux frequently uses medical terminology or metaphorical allusions, these are often incorrect or superficial. In various passages he writes, 'the ganglion [of the revolution] burst' (1961) and of 'Madrid pulsing as a vein' (1938), but these lapses in understanding are outweighed by very perceptive insights such as 'the saurian brain' (1977), meaning a primitive entity existing in the human mind. His most compelling use of medical images, however, is in vivid synecdoche and metaphor. Although there have been many literary studies of imagery in the works of Malraux, they have seldom addressed his use of medical imagery directly (Wilkinson 1967, Tarica 1980).

Malraux uses medical images and plot devices extensively in his earliest major works, the Asian novels. In 'The Conquerors', a work that in many respects is a preliminary sketch for scenes in 'Man's Fate', the foreigners who are controlling the popular revolution in China are themselves ill. Garine, the propaganda commissar, is dving of more than just malaria, and a trial for abetting in an illegal abortion is in his past. Borodin, the political commissar, will develop a fever. Among all the Europeans, including the narrator, a state of torpitude isolates them from the frantic revolutionary action which surrounds them. Their illness is not a susceptibility to tropical diseases, however, but comes from within as the manifestation of the decadence of foreigners manipulating a revolution of the masses (Wilkinson 1967). Another interpretation of the malaise and exhaustion which expresses itself as physical illness is that it represents the morally erosive subordination of personal ideals and reason to the unquestioned service of ruthless collective action: '... individual conscience is the real disease of leaders'. In 'The Conquerors' the infection is in the Europeans who have assumed the ancient role of conquerors; when the Chinese act in a manner just as brutal, dragging the weight of a history of suppression and decay centuries longer, their actions nonetheless have a purity and simplicity because it is their own struggle. The Chinese die of violence, the Europeans of decay and lassitude.

In 'Man's Fate', Malraux's use of medical imagery is more subtle than the relatively crude allegory in 'The Conquerors'. The principal character, Kyo, is the politically committed but hesitant son of an art professor and is married to a European doctor, May. They are a duality, an alienated man and a nurturing woman, a revolutionary accepting the need for terror and a physician devoted to healing. Both, however, combine intellect with a will and capability to act, in contrast to those around them who either act without thought or contemplate events with detachment. When Kyo is captured, he avoids death by incineration by accepting a pellet of cyanide generously given him by another revolutionary who will die more painfully; the symbolism of cellular anoxia and the symptoms of dyspnoea lead the reader to feel the sense of suffocation and repression. In another use of medical imagery, the fanatical assassin, Chen, wounds himself with every act of terrorism he commits, as if his actions are destroying himself as well. Finally, during an attempt on the life of Chiang Kai-shek, Chen's suicidal bombing leaves him conscious on the pavement for a few seconds afteward, with last thoughts that he cannot express. Perhaps the most chilling image in 'Man's Fate' is the recurrent allusion to a crying child in another room. The child is assumed to be in great and inconsolable pain and will die. (The image is used again in 'Lazarus'.) What is actually dying is not clear, but in Malraux's philosophy it is more likely to be innocence than hope.

'Man's Hope' contains the most explicitly medical episodes. Several particularly evocative

scenes occur on the wards of San Carlos Hospital, east of Madrid. In one particularly moving passage, a gravely wounded Spanish Republican soldier gnashes his teeth in excruciating pain as his mother tries to console him with all she has to offer – her kisses. Toward the end of this often brutal novel is the famous scene in which the airman, Gardet, having survived the interception of his plane, is brought down from the mountain crash site by silently reverent peasants who know that his face is destroyed beyond reconstruction. He has given more than his life to the struggle; he has sacrificed his identity as a person.

Malraux's other works include other evocative images. In both 'The Walnut Trees of Altenburg' and the derivative scenes in 'Lazarus', he uses an amoral toxicologist involved in chemical warfare to symbolize the anonymity and depersonalization of evil in a technological age. He is fascinated by poisons and refers to cyanide, mustard gas and strychnine in his work with more accuracy than he describes infectious diseases. The description of Malraux's own hospitalization in 'Lazarus' should be read with some scepticism. His description of his own symptoms is often vague and it would be totally out of character for him to be candid about something so personal. However, the incident he describes appears more likely to be related to some neurological complication of his lung cancer or a drug reaction than to his chronic condition, which will be discussed next. Quite possibly he had a cerebellar metastasis or an extrapyramidal drug reaction, but his descriptions are imprecise and what is clearly true about the events described are his sense of being suspended between life and nonexistence (since he cannot describe death) and his intensely intellectual but therapeutic relationship with his neurologist.

Malraux perceived physicians as priests, as ministers to the body carrying on an ancient mission of both healing and esoteric knowledge (Bertagna 1977). He admired them greatly and sought their company. Yet, despite his interest in both medicine and the history of religion (Bockel 1976), none of his major characters are either physicians or priests. (May is cast in a supporting role, as are all women in Malraux's novels: Ayer 1976.) Perhaps the reason for this paradox is that the sacerdotal role of either was not central to his major interest, the independent life of ideas and the commitment of the individual in the currents of history. Healing and the relief of suffering, even on a grand scale, were less fundamental to his thinking than the interplay of thought and action. His vision was broad, but perhaps he missed an application of his talents. His contemporary, Albert Camus, who was greatly influenced by Malraux, skilfully used medicine as an allegory for personal commitment against evil in 'The Plague' (Camus 1948, Guidotti 1976), a theme Malraux would have handled quite differently but very likely with brilliance.

Malraux's own illness

Numerous correspondents and biographers of Malraux have remarked on his facial tics (Lacouture 1975, Langlois 1976, Tarica 1980, Bockel 1976, Gold 1979). These have been described as very severe and refractory to medication, but apparently partially responsive to a 'deep sleep cure' he took in Switzerland in the early 1960s (Walter Langlois, personal communication 1982). The onset of these facial tics dates at least to Malraux's early adolescence, as recalled by a schoolmate (Lacouture 1975).

A second clue to his illness is the presence of involuntary guttural noises, which were described by Arthur Koestler as 'awe-inspiring sniffs, which sound like the cry of a wounded jungle beast' (Lacouture 1975, McMullen 1976). This unusual behaviour persisted after the sleep cure (Langlois, personal communication 1982), and may have been associated with hand movements (Lacouture 1975, McMullen 1976).

Individual speech patterns are obviously very difficult to interpret. There is no sure evidence that Malraux involuntarily spoke obscenities or imitated the speech or behaviour of others. One peculiar incident occurred during a political rally in Paris, however, when Malraux suddenly abandoned his prepared remarks and began to chant 'De Gaulle! De Gaulle' for some minutes (Bockel 1976). It is not clear whether this was a public episode of palilalia or a rhetorical device. An unedited transcript of a 1974 interview contains only two instances of repetitive phrases, neither of which is peculiar in context (Sishupal 1978).

The Malraux family has remained silent on their distinguished relative's illnesses and Malraux's personal physician, while acknowledging the potential significance of his patient's condition to his life and work, is bound by the physician-patient relationship to maintain strict confidentiality (Bertagna 1977, and personal communication 1983). Although Malraux was not forthcoming about his personal and health affairs during life, he raised the issue of his illness himself in 'Lazarus'. It cannot be presumptuous, therefore, to examine the public record in order to reach a tentative conclusion as to what his disorder might have been and how it might have influenced his work.

Based on the available biographical data, Malraux's illness appears to have been the Tourette syndrome. The diagnostic criteria are largely met: childhood or adolescent onset, involuntary motor and vocal tics which may wax and wane and which persist through life. Suggestive evidence supporting this diagnosis includes the apparent response of the condition to sleep and the knowledge that Malraux took medication, presumably haloperidol. (His hospitalization described in 'Lazarus' might have related to a side effect of his medication, which he would have taken for several years.) Other tic and tic-like disorders appear incompatible with published descriptions of Malraux's behaviour, particularly since his vocalizations were too frequent for chronic motor tics (Singer 1982). Malraux's known heavy cigarette-smoking habit, his obsessive-compulsive personality, and his obvious predilection for placing himself in stressful situations may have exacerbated the manifestations of the Tourette syndrome (Singer 1982, Lowe et al. 1982).

The implications of this diagnosis for interpreting the influence of Malraux's condition on his work must be approached cautiously. His lack of formal education, his habit of abrupt conversational breaks, and his tendency to be a loner may be glibly explained away as reflecting the characteristic learning disabilities, short attention span, and secondary psychological coping mechanisms which may accompany the disorder. This interpretation is probably incorrect, however. It would be hard to imagine an adolescent with a significant learning disability transformed into such an inspired autodidact. Malraux's conversational style gave one 'the impression of being sprayed from a verbal and intellectual firehose' (Langlois, personal communication 1982) but his train of thought, however baroque, kept on track. His academic record is also reported to have been good in primary school, even in the sciences (Lacouture 1975). More likely, his condition made him acutely aware of human gestures, and literary critics have noticed his fascination with hands and the face (Tarica 1980). It may have contributed to his interest in medicine. For the most part, however, it was probably a nuisance at times and at other times yet another highly individual characteristic to accompany those that he self-consciously cultivated.

It is entirely possible that Malraux used his disorder as he did all other elements of his life, to cultivate legend. Since there was no way to suppress it, he may have incorporated it into his persona as he did the other symbols of his active and flamboyant life: the cigarette dangling from his lip, the exquisitely tailored suits, the melodramatic trench coat, and the disarming chatter about cats.

Malraux's place in the future

Malraux's neurological disorder was hardly disabling. It may have been a nuisance, but Malraux had a talent for weaving his idiosyncracies into an image. This image of *Thomme engagé*, the man of and for his time who is committed to intelligent and deliberate action in the service of a cause larger than himself, has endured, broadened, and come to embrace both sexes. As Frohock, a prescient critic, wrote in 1949, 'Malraux is beginning to look permanent'.

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